

ב. מאנישעוויטץ

אידישע קינדער שעה



פעטער נחום מיט זיין קליינזארג - געהערט יעדן זונטאג 1.30, דורך W L T H ברוקלין, נ. י.

Jewish Children Hour

Sponsored by the

B. Manischewitz Matzo Co.

Every Sunday, 1.30 P.M.

STATION W L T H 1400 KILOCYCLES
- BROOKLYN, N. Y. -

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נחום

סטוטשקאוו

(„פעטער נחום“)

Nahum Stutchkoff

MAME-LOSHN

edited by Alec Eliezer Burko

with an introduction and comprehensive bibliography

by Alec Eliezer Burko and Amanda Seigel

Forward

New York 2014

נחום סטוטשקאָוו
מאַמע-לשון

Nahum Stutchkoff
MAME-LOSHN

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Stutchkoff's papers and scripts, including the ads for Seagram's Whiskey and Beech-Nut Chewing Gum opposite the Yiddish title page, courtesy of the New York Public Library – Dorot Jewish Division.

Cover photo of Stutchkoff speaking at the Jewish Sanitarium for Incurables in Brooklyn courtesy of Stutchkoff's grandson, Steven Baron.

Cover photo of Stutchkoff's head shot courtesy of the Forward Photo Archive.

Image of the sheet music for Stutchkoff's "Jewish Children Hour," opposite the English title page, courtesy of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, from the Henry Sapoznik Collection.

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English Introduction

Who was Nahum Stutchkoff?

From the 1930s through the 1950s, Nahum Stutchkoff was a household name among American Jews. His weekly radio series on *Forward* station WEVD drew untold thousands of listeners, and many old-timers still remember his voice. Yiddish radio remained a formidable cultural force into the postwar period, long after the Yiddish theater and the Yiddish press were in significant decline. Many Jews who had moved to the outer boroughs and found it inconvenient to travel to Second Avenue, or who now consumed news and culture mostly in English, still relied on Yiddish radio for entertainment at home on long Sunday afternoons. Yiddish radio thus extended the careers of many Yiddish actors who could no longer make a living from stage performances alone. Even Jews of the second generation, most of them unable to read Yiddish, could still understand and enjoy Stutchkoff's programs. He wrote and starred in many of the most popular of the era, like the comedy series "Annie and Benny" and the weekly melodramas "Around the Family Table" (*Ba tate-mames tish*) and "People with Troubles" (*Tsores ba laytn*). These were the sitcoms and soap operas of the age before television.¹

Stutchkoff also began his career on the stage. He performed with various troupes in Poland and Russia, before moving with his family to America in 1923. Although he wrote for and performed with many of the biggest stars of the day, including Molly Picon, Menasha Skulnik, and Ludwig Satz, he himself only achieved stardom with the advent of Yiddish radio in the early 1930s. He found his first position in 1931 behind the display window of Al Entin's women's clothing store on Pitkin Avenue in Brooklyn, where the owner had installed a small radio studio. He soon moved up to station WLTH, where he hosted a talent show for Jewish

1. Several recordings from the 1930s (with simultaneous English translation) of Stutchkoff's series "Around the Family Table," as well as a radio documentary about him, can be heard on the website of the Yiddish Radio Project: <http://yiddishradioproject.org/exhibits/stutchkoff/>

children, the "Jewish Children Hour" (advertised in the the image opposite the title page of this volume). New York was home to multiple stations with Yiddish programming through the early 1940s, but in 1932 the *Forward* acquired station WEVD and immediately made it the most important source of Yiddish radio. Stutchkoff promptly jumped ship. An amazingly prolific writer, Stutchkoff produced many hundreds of original episodes of his various series, and hundreds, if not thousands, of independent scenes, sketches, and ads for his sponsors. (His exaltation of Manischewitz Matzo was especially well remembered.) Listeners knew him as an announcer and as a performer in his own programs, but most were for many years wholly unaware of another side of his productivity.

Entirely self-taught, Stutchkoff became one of the foremost Yiddish lexicographers of the 20th century. In 1931 he published the first Yiddish rhyming dictionary (*Gramen-leksikon*), the basis for many of his own radio jingles. In 1950, under the editorship of Max Weinreich, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research published Stutchkoff's monumental *Thesaurus of the Yiddish Language*. Although Yiddish was spoken by over 10 million Jews around the world before World War II, there was still no comprehensive dictionary in the language. Stutchkoff was thus himself compelled to collect many words and expressions of the language for the first time, by scouring the literature and other sources with a pen in hand. He then organized the material into groups according to the similarity of meaning, on the model of Roget's well-known English Thesaurus. His collection of almost 175,000 separate linguistic items (words, sayings, idioms, curses, blessings etc.) remains the largest completed work of Yiddish lexicography to this day.

Critics lavished Stutchkoff's *Thesaurus* with praise, calling it a "super-dictionary,"² "the skyscraper of our language,"³ "the most important Yiddish book of our generation," "a turning point in the history of Yiddish literature,"⁴ and "a turning point in the history of our language."⁵ It immediately became a must-have for Yiddish writers and journalists: some 2000 copies were sold within the first year – a remarkable achievement for a thousand-page Yiddish reference work. Still, it did not necessarily make for appealing reading for his masses of radio listeners, few of whom felt the need to compose prose and poetry in a sophisticated Yiddish.

Stutchkoff's solution was the program "Mame-loshn," which premiered on WEVD in 1948, in anticipation of the book's publication. "Mame-loshn" served both to promote the

2. A. Mukdoyni. "Di ashires fun yidish." *Morgn-zhurnal*. Date unknown (among Stutchkoff's papers).

3. Shmuel Rozhanski. Review in *Di yidishe tsaytung*. 17-18-19 May, 1950.

4. Jacob Shatzky. "A Superb Yiddish Thesaurus" from *Circle in Jewish Bookland*, November, 1950.

5. Nathan Süsskind. "Der oytser." *Di tsukunft*. Vol. 58. January, 1953. pp. 36-38.

Thesaurus, like a weekly advertisement, and to popularize its contents. The program made accessible the vast treasury of words, especially the phraseological gems that would otherwise remain hidden in the small print. In the form of questions and answers, based on letters from the listeners (most of them probably invented), Stutchkoff aimed to entertain as well as to inform, peppering his explanations with jokes and anecdotes. In the very first episode he explained the motivation behind the program:

Reason number one: after the great catastrophe in Europe, when Amalek's murderous hand wiped six million Jews off the face of the earth – the most Jewish, the most creative part of our people – now *Mame-loshn*, Yiddish, has been left without a mother and without a father. *Mame-loshn* has been left an orphan, and to us American Jews falls part of the great responsibility to keep this orphan alive, if we want to remain living as a people.

Mame-loshn is the tie that binds and connects us to our brothers and sisters living all over the world. And to those who are no longer among the living. Generations of Jews have cried and rejoiced in *Mame-loshn*. Through *Mame-loshn* we are connected to them, we are a people with a past, with a future. Without *Mame-loshn*, it is as if we were just born, forlorn, devoid of any Jewish content. Let us give our children a Jewish education, let us expand and develop Yiddish literature, the Yiddish language and so on. And in all humility, I myself, Nahum Stutchkoff, an old admirer of *Mame-loshn*, wish to contribute my part to this work. In my program "Mame-loshn" I will try to show you how beautiful and rich, how savory and juicy our language is, how we have nothing to be ashamed of in comparison with other languages.

Stutchkoff explained the origins of hundreds of words and expression, and debunked numerous myths surrounding the language (many of them still with us today). He made recommendations on how to express oneself with authentic Yiddish words, rather with the more popular English equivalents. His most frequent advice to listeners was to speak as their mothers and grandmothers had in Europe, for whom English words would have been *targum-loshn* (Aramaic, i.e. the Yiddish equivalent of "it's Greek to me"). Often he created dramatic scenes of Old Country life as illustrations, for example, for the word "accident":

<p><i>Shtelt aykh for, di mame loyft arayn fun gas a bleykhe, a farsopete. Vos iz geshen? S'iz geshen an eksident mit Khayim-Itshes kind. A ferd hot zikh raspoloshet un – bahit zol men vern! Fregt men di mame: "Mame, vos iz geshen?" Entfert di mame: "Fregt nisht, kinder! An umglik iz geshen! A tsore! An onshikenish! An oysgos! A gzar-min-hashomayim, men zol es shoyrn gornisht zen!</i></p>	<p>Just imagine, your mother runs in from the street, pale, out of breath. What's happened? There's been an accident with Khayim-Itshe's child. A horse reared up on its hind legs and – may God preserve us! So you ask your mother: "Mother, what's happened?" And she answers: "Don't ask, children! A misfortune has happened! A calamity! A mishap! A disaster! A punishment from Heaven, may you never see it!</p>
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Stutchkoff then typically asked his listeners rhetorically: Don't your mother's expressions have more Jewish flavor, more *yidishn tam*, than the English ("accident" etc.)?

In order to acquaint the reader further with the character of the program, below are several segments from "Mame-loshn" in translation.

To Lather Up

A fellow from the Bronx writes: "I remember from the Old Country, when somebody was cheated, they used to say: *Oy, was he lathered up! Why lathered up?*"

I don't know where you're from, Mister. If you're from a small town, where fairs used to take place, you probably witnessed the same scene as I did once. It was a big fair in the town where I was born. I went by Moyshe the old-time barber-surgeon. (You probably know that the folk healers also served as barbers in the shtetl.) So I went by Moyshe the barber-surgeon and I saw that outside in front of his shop a bunch of Gentiles were sitting on chairs, ten of them at least, all with their faces lathered up, and they were sweating like beavers. And Moyshe the barber-surgeon was sweating more than anyone. He was standing and scraping one Gentile's face and saying the whole time to those he had lathered up: "Hold your horses, I'll get to you right away." At first I didn't understand what was going on. If they needed to wait, why had he lathered them up – just so they could perspire in this heat? Afterwards I caught on. What a wise guy! If he hadn't lathered them up, they would have gone off to his competitor, Berl Pentsak, but because he had lathered them up, they had to wait. From this underhanded maneuver of the old-time barbers comes the expression *lather up* for 'to cheat.'

The Thief's Hat is On Fire

A fellow from Brooklyn asks me: "There's an expression: *The thief's hat is on fire*. Is that a Yiddish saying? Because I know that you say it in Russian too."

Not just in Russian, my friend, you say it in many languages. But because the saying is widespread among Jews in Yiddish, it also has a rightful place in the *Thesaurus of the Yiddish Language*. There is no point in scrutinizing the origin of sayings, even less than the origin of words. Professor Archer Taylor, a well-known authority in the field of proverbs, has come to the conclusion, after a lengthy study, that there is no such thing as purely national proverbs. Proverbs are the common property of all nations. The only criterion for proverbs should be: is it said among us, is it a saying widespread among the people? Is it ours? What's that you say – another nation has it too? So much the better! He who begrudges others shouldn't have it himself.

The fellow from Brooklyn also wants to know where the expression comes from and when to say it.

My friend, like many such sayings, it comes from an anecdote or from something that actually happened. The anecdotes or events have been forgotten, but the sayings remain.

In Yiddish, the anecdote goes like this: there is a fair in town. The market in front of the church is full of people – Jews, Gentiles, townsmen, visitors from elsewhere. It's buzzing with activity, buying and selling. In a word – a fair! Suddenly you hear somebody yell: "Help, I've

been robbed! My wallet with my money has been stolen!" Of course, a crowd of people circle around this fellow and they all shake their heads in dismay: "What a shame! A Jew has been robbed." The thief is also there in the circle, but how do you identify him, when he shakes his head too and also says "What a shame!" But one smart aleck has an idea and he calls out: "*Oy! The thief's hat is on fire!*" The thief forgets himself and, scared to death, grabs his hat. "That's the thief," says the smart aleck. From this it is clear that you use the expression when speaking about somebody who has a bad conscience and who gets agitated at the slightest thing that anyone mentions that reminds him of his misdeed, even when nobody means him.

But that isn't the only expression Jews have on this topic. You can also say: *When you knock on the table, the scissors answer; you don't show a stick to a thief; whoever feels they meant him – they meant him; what someone has in himself he projects onto others.* And who can remember them all?

Put Down Your Father

A fellow from Manhattan writes: "This week a friend came to visit and asked me for a favor, for me to sign a loan that he wants to take out. When he saw that I hesitated a little, he says to me: 'Don't fool around, just *put down your father* and let's go.' I look at him: 'What do you mean,' I say, '*put down your father?*' He says: 'I mean to sign your name, that's how we say it.'" And this fellow asks: "Is there such an expression in Yiddish? If so, what does it mean and where does it come from?"

If you weren't too lazy to give it some thought, my friend, you would yourself come up with the meaning and the origin of the saying. It's a very simple matter. Before family names arose, Jews used to sign themselves like this: Shlomo ben Chaim Ha-Cohen, or Israel ben Reb Zebulon me-Brisk de-Lita. That is, a Yiddish signature consisted of two names – of the signer's name and of the name of his father, just as the Slavs still do it today. A Russian, for example, signs his name: Osip Gavrilovitch Zolotukhin, or Miron Vladimirovitch Skorosheykin.

Understand? That's why you say, in jest, for signing your name: *put down your father*.

Oh, Dear

A girl from Brooklyn wants me to give her an equivalent expression for the English "Oh, dear," which you say when you hear bad news: "Oh, dear."

I was curious to see what other expressions English has for "Oh, dear" and I found in *Roget's Thesaurus* such expressions as: *alas, heigh-ho, ah me, woe is me, lackaday, what a pity.* Do they have any flavor for you? Not for me. Such dull words that say nothing, that leave you cold. On the other hand, when I opened the *Thesaurus of the Yiddish Language* and I saw what we have, I thought: Now these are some words!

Vey iz mir, okh iz mir, okh un vey iz mir, vind iz mir, vind un vey iz mir, a klog iz mir, vist iz mir, fintster iz mir, a brokh iz mir, a shlak iz mir, a khurbn iz mir, nisht gut iz mir, an umglik iz mir geshen, a duner hot mikh dershlogn – you hear words? These aren't tasteless noodles, no "Oh, dear" – these words pack a punch. All the more so when you accompany them with the appropriate gesture, for example, a handclap: *Oy a brokh iz mir!* Then it shakes you to your core.

In our town there was a woman named Khaye-Ronye the Carpenter's Wife. Her husband, Dovid-Pinkhes the Carpenter, worked for somebody else, so she used to bring him a bowl of home cooking for lunch every day. One time I'm going with my mother (may she rest in peace) on the street and we meet Khaye-Ronye with her bowl. My mother stops her and says: "Have you heard the good news, Khaye-Ronye?" "What good news?" Khaye-Ronye asks. "You haven't heard? There just came a telegram from Warsaw that Simkhelekhe the Tavern Keeper's Wife died under the knife." Khaye-Ronye became white as chalk and she said to my mother: "Hold my bowl for a minute." So my mother took the bowl. With her hands free, Khaye-Ronye clapped them together and cried out: "*Oy a brokh iz mir!*" As long as I live, I will remember that clap and that *Oy a brokh iz mir*.

The point of the story is that, if Khaye-Ronye had spoken English, she wouldn't have needed to give my mother the bowl to hold, she would have just said "Oh, dear" and that's that. But just try saying *Oy a brokh iz mir* with a bowl in your hands.

Red Behind the Ears

A woman from Brooklyn writes: "Talking with a friend of mine about an older man, a widower who would still like to find a match, she says: 'What's the matter? He's a spry fellow, *he's still red behind the ears*.' I ask her what she means by *red behind the ears*, and she says: 'There's an expression like that.'" And the woman asks: "Do Jews really have such an expression?"

Jews do indeed have an expression like that and it comes from the time when Jewish women used to go to the market at the crack of dawn in order to buy fish for the Sabbath, and they wanted to know whether the fish was fresh. The first thing they used to do was to check behind the fish's ears. If it was still red behind the ears, it was still alright. If not, it was no good. That's why, when you're talking about an older person who still has some vim and vinegar to him, who is still good for both *kiddush* and *havdalah*, so to speak, you say: *He's still read behind the ears*.

Part of Stutchkoff's appeal lay in his conversational style and popular American brand of Yiddish. On the radio he did not have the luxury of speaking a refined European Yiddish and of not being understood by the unwashed masses. Especially in his comedies and melodramas, he made use of many of the English words that had found their way into the speech of the immigrant community. In this respect, at least, his programs accurately reflected American Jewish life. A similar linguistic tolerance can be found in "Mame-loshn" – although it runs counter to the general message of the program, to use the old Yiddish words instead of English – and even in the *Thesaurus* itself. Readers may be surprised to discover in it such Yiddish words as:

<i>short soyokit</i>	short circuit	<i>monki-biznes</i>	monkey business
<i>peyper-henger</i>	paper hanger	<i>shatap!</i>	shut up!
<i>noyrseri</i>	nursery	<i>dres-rihoysl</i>	dress rehearsal
<i>viltsher</i>	wheelchair	<i>dendrof</i>	dandruff
<i>hitshhayker</i>	hitchhiker	<i>hat-voter-batl</i>	hot water bottle
<i>krostaunbos</i>	crosstown bus	<i>employment-eydzhensi</i>	employment agency
<i>kadliver-oyl</i>	cod liver oil	<i>pauer ov atoyrni</i>	power of attorney
<i>tayroid glend</i>	thyroid gland	<i>naytklob</i>	nightclub
<i>soyrloyn-steyk</i>	sirloin stake	<i>salveyshn armi</i>	salvation army
<i>tshap sui</i>	chop suey	<i>sanevagan</i>	son of a gun
<i>tshou meyn</i>	chow mein	<i>bronks tshir</i>	Bronx cheer
<i>paynepl-dzhus</i>	pineapple juice	<i>salun-kipar</i>	saloon keeper
<i>beybi-grand-pyano</i>	baby grand piano	<i>butleger</i>	bootlegger
<i>long-distens</i>	long distance	<i>nou tsheki nou vashi</i>	no checkee, no washee

In fact, Stutchkoff's *Thesaurus* contains over 1500 Americanisms, some of which would be unlikely to appear even in an English thesaurus. Nor are they the only dubious Yiddish vocabulary included – there are almost 3000 Germanisms, over 1000 Slavisms, almost 500 vulgarisms, 700 comic expressions, and another 700 archaisms, dialectisms, words from criminal slang, theater and klezmer jargon, and even Soviet terms. The editor, Max Weinreich, labeled all these words with the general purpose of letting users know not to use them; but Stutchkoff made the decision to include them and, on occasion, he used them himself. Even in his first book, the rhyming dictionary, he had demonstrated his fondness for linguistic diversity. There is a good deal of English vocabulary and various Lithuanian and Polish dialect pronunciations – rhyming Polish-Yiddish *shtut* (city) with *institut*, or Polish-Yiddish *universiteyt* (university) with Lithuanian-Yiddish *breyt* (bread), and then with English *gate*, *date*, *state*, *plate*, and *real estate*.

In a sense, Stutchkoff's *Thesaurus* served as a sort of monument to the European Jewish communities which had perished, and he considered it a great honor that it had fallen to his lot to "save in written form a part of the great linguistic inheritance that they left us."⁶ For such a monument it seemed appropriate to include almost anything that Yiddish-speaking Jews had ever said or written, the good and the bad. Nevertheless, Stutchkoff made clear that the *Thesaurus* was not meant to be a museum for a dead language and he expressed the hope that it would inspire continued creativity in Yiddish around the world.

Both the *Thesaurus* and the rhyming dictionary reflect the bubbling creativity and linguistic anarchy of popular Yiddish culture in America, especially of the Yiddish theater. Work as an actor and a playwright had honed Stutchkoff's ear to the nuances of American Yiddish

6. From a speech among Stutchkoff's papers, cited more fully in the Yiddish introduction to this volume (p. 42).

speech, and enabled him both to compose dramatic dialogue that rang true and to record the popular idiom accurately. Even the publication of his works came about, in no small part, thanks to monetary contributions from friends in the theater world and from his radio sponsors.

In his comedies and melodramas, not only did Stutchkoff's characters use English words and phrases, they often engaged in wholesale code-switching – what linguists call the rapid shifting back and forth between languages within the same conversation. The same phenomenon is characteristic of most immigrant groups and can still be observed, for example, among Yiddish-speaking Orthodox Jews living in Brooklyn today. Here is a dramatic moment from an episode of Stutchkoff series from the 1940s "It's a Small World" (*A velt mit veltelekh*; the English words are in bold):

Goldman: *Mister* Markovitsh, ikh gey aheym...

Markovitsh: Vos meynt ir, ir geyt aheym?

Goldman: Mayn shnirele hot mir nor vos gegebn di **sek**...

Markovitsh: Vos?

Goldman: Ot dos vos ir hert... Far di **veydzhes** vos zi tsolt, zogt zi, ken zi krign a bal-melokhe vos zol aroysgebn arbet un nisht azan altn yidn vi ikh... Haymi, zay azoy gut, dortn shteyt mayn **lontsh-basket**.

Markovitsh: Vart a vayle, **Mister** Goldman, vart a vayle. Ikh hob do oykh epes tsu zogn... Ikh bin der **shap tsherman**... Un on mir **sekt** men nisht keyn arbeter... **Did you hear, boys, what happened? They sacked the old man!** An eygenem tatn, vos hot ale zayne yorn opgefinstert in **shap** far azelkhe klogedike **veydzhes**... Un hot in **shap** zayne koykhes farloyrn... **Boys! Stop your work, I declare a stoppage.**

Goldman: **Mister** Markovitsh, I'm going home...

Markovitsh: What do you mean, you're going home?

Goldman: My daughter-in-law just gave me the **sack**...

Markovitsh: What?

Goldman: Just what you heard... For the **wages** that she pays, she says she can get a laborer who can really work and not an old man like me... Haymie, if you don't mind, my **lunch basket** is over there.

Markovitsh: Hold your horses, **Mister** Goldman, wait a minute. I also have a say in this... I'm the **shop chairman**... And without me no one **sacks** any workers. **Did you hear, boys, what happened? They sacked the old man!** Their own father, who worked all his life in a miserable **shop** for such pitiful **wages**... And spent his last energy in the **shop**... **Boys! Stop your work, I declare a stoppage.**

Stutchkoff occasionally used English didactically, in order to teach his listeners Yiddish; first a character used the English word, and then the Yiddish equivalent. Similarly, the Americanisms of the *Thesaurus* could function as definitions for the Yiddish words which the reader was unlikely to know, for example, for some of the neologisms introduced by the editor; Yiddish *shpayz-fargreyter*, for example, was explained by the English "caterer."

In the two years after the publication of his *Thesaurus*, Stutchkoff reorganized his card

catalogue in order to add new words, in anticipation of an expanded second edition. In fact, no such edition ever appeared, but the card catalogue became the basis for a far more ambitious project: a full academic dictionary of the Yiddish language, of the same sort (though lesser in scope) as the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Stutchkoff gathered a team at the YIVO, most notably, the Yiddish linguists Yudel Mark and Judah A. Joffe, who served as editors, and began work on the *Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language*. But for reasons of policy and personality, he left the project after only three years, in 1955. In his final years, Stutchkoff turned, instead, to Hebrew lexicography and before his death completed the manuscript for a *Thesaurus of the Hebrew Language*. This volume, published in 1968, three years after the author's death, turned out even more voluminous than his Yiddish *Thesaurus*.

In retrospect, it is unfortunate that Stutchkoff turned his energies elsewhere, because Hebrew lexicography would have done fine without him, while Yiddish has not been so lucky. In the decades after his departure, the *Great Dictionary* staff collected literally hundreds of thousands more words and citations from Yiddish literature, and printed four massive volumes, covering all of the first letter *alef*. Unfortunately, however, the project was never finished and today Stutchkoff's enormous card catalogue lies, unused, in boxes at YIVO's offsite storage facility in Newark, New Jersey. Hopefully, the cards and other materials will one day be transcribed and made publically accessible online, as a supplement to the excellent smaller Yiddish dictionaries which are now available.

If there was need for Stutchkoff's help to revitalize Yiddish when his *Thesaurus* was published in 1950, that is the case now more than ever. Not only has the number of speakers declined dramatically, from 4 or 5 million after World War II to several hundred thousand active users today, but the Yiddish that remains has in many ways become impoverished. Many of the colorful idioms and expressions, for which Yiddish is justly famous, have gradually been forgotten. Students who learn the language are often limited to the textbook vocabulary, and even many ultra-Orthodox Jews, who still speak Yiddish in their daily lives, remain unaware of the riches of their own language. Under our current circumstances, a fresh infusion of Stutchkoff can do us all good.